


Chapter 5

Black Women Will Save Us: Partnering Black Feminist Theory With Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Teach Undergraduate Writing

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ABSTRACT

This essay coalesces Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy with bell hooks' and Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist theory and pedagogy to teach undergraduate College English at a Historically Black College/University. The author explores assigning culturally relevant texts, engaging peer partnering/peer review, and using writing assignments to allow students to shift from a subjected position to the subject position. In this essay, the author also includes detailed assignment descriptions and a sample student submission as evidence of how assigning culturally relevant assessments might appear in the classroom. The essay closes with a brief reimagination of the classroom in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which now privileges an increased awareness of student's mental health and wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Between large-language models assisting students with outsourcing course material (Park & Kim, 2022; Moritz, Romeike, Stosch, & Tolks, 2023; Yu, 2023), book bans forcing public school libraries to remove historical narratives recalling the lived experiences of Ruby Bridges, Harvey Milk, and Rosa Parks (Collins, 2023; Pérez,

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2022, Lapierre, 2023; Harris & Alter 2022), and curriculum laws across the South leading to limited teaching about the history of civil rights in America (Wagner, 2023; Wootson, 2023), the college classroom is in danger. Some might mistakenly believe the college classroom exists separately from the secondary school classroom, but in Florida, where the Republican governor has targeted university tenure, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and entire university programs and departments in his quest to “stop woke,” even post-secondary institutions are grappling with a radically altered American educational institution (Contreras, 2023; Kumar & Hodgson 2023; & Poff 2023). If conservative, far right Republicans succeed, American academics will be barred from teaching about gender, sexual orientation and/or identity, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, American chattel slavery, and systemic racism.

From the perspective of Florida’s Republican governor, teaching about American inequality is equivalent to practicing what he calls, being “woke.” Engaging in “wokeness,” 2024 GOP presidential hopeful, Ron DeSantis’ current communications director, Taryn Fenske suggests a belief that “there are systemic injustices in American society” (Bump, 2022). Apparently, systemic injustice is akin to Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and monsters under the bed: if Americans can only disbelieve injustice, injustice will cease to exist. By extension, if injustice no longer exists because of this disbelief, then any efforts to highlight or legitimize inequity are “woke” and therefore unacceptable in Florida schools. This also means anyone teaching “wokeness” is engaging in pedagogy counter to the governor’s guidelines.

While this piece is directed to college faculty, what happens in secondary school classrooms affects college classrooms as well, so as a Florida native and now Floridian professor, the need for culturally relevant teaching feels even more imperative. The classroom must be made safer. The curriculum must challenge government silencing. For encouragement, let us look to noted sociologist Patricia Hill Collins who offers these words, which can be used as a rallying cry to the professoriate: Black women in America— and Florida more specifically—“now stand at a different historical moment [and] appear to have found a voice” (Hill Collins, 1996, p. 9). This is Hill Collins in 1996, discussing the rise of Black feminism and womanism as academic theories, and her words continue to resonate in the hearts and minds of Black female scholars who endeavor to raise their individual and collective voices. For these academicians, the classroom has become a bully pulpit, and Black women are poised and capable of saving our souls, but it will take courage, determination, and theory to shift the world on its axis.

For those charged to command college classrooms as Black and brown folks and/or indigenous folks, LGBTQIA+ and/or passably cisgender folks, and/or historically underrepresented folks, there is an increased responsibility to teach what students may well have been unable to learn. Students might enter the classroom racist, sexist, and homophobic, but students must not leave the classroom the same way they entered.

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